Modern Prejudice in Everyday Interactions: Perceptions and Behavioral Attitudes Toward Social Status

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ABSTRACT

Social status diversifies experiences. From personal achievements to interpersonal interactions, the disparity is often forged by individuals either deliberately or indeliberately. Regardless of the purpose, such actions entail stereotypes, ultimately reinforcing discrimination. This research aims at exploring a potential route through which status privilege socially pervades and solidifies: the perceptions of and consequent reactions to different occupations. Undergraduate students in South Korea participated in the study. First, participants read three chronologically invented scripts, conceiving of themselves as interacting with fictitious characters with either an upper- or a lower-status occupation. Next, they imagined their tentative attitudes as well as expectations of each character. Analyses revealed that participants reacted more favorably to the upper-status characters in the two of the three interactions. Furthermore, these characters were expected to be significantly more competent and intelligent than those with a lower-status occupation. Together, the findings spotlight one type of modern prejudice that may influence not only everyday communications but important decision-making processes.

Introduction

South Korea's highest reputative national university recently faced recurring tragedies underlaid by its neglect of the laborers. One janitor of the school passed away in 2019, while resting in an enclosed underground staff lounge a few days before the heart surgery (Lee, 2019; Roh, 2021). Two years after, a death of another janitor disclosed that there was chronic irrational workplace bullying, as well as inhumane workloads and working condition behind the incident (Kang, 2021; Shim, 2021).

The laborers went on an indefinite strike demanding the school to take responsibility and apologize for the "social death" caused by its oversight (Jung, 2021). Only a month took for the school to complete the corrective measures ordered by the government. This immediate improvement signified nothing but their former ignorance. Most facility management workers receive minimum wage salaries and endure overwork, but rarely claim their welfare rights due to employment instability (Kan, 2021; Um, 2021). Despite its social recognition throughout the years, mistreatments of those in so-called "lowly" positions proved unresolved.

The Pervasive Impacts of Social Status

The rise of the economic gap has recently vitalized relevant studies and discourses; yet, status still determines the chances that we could relish throughout life (Manstead, 2018; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). Social status is defined as one's position at the social strata based on income, educational attainment and occupational prestige (Bucciol et al., 2019). This relative position impacts well-being, undeniably shaping the quality and stability of life. Status entails differences in social, financial and educational resources as well as cultures (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). These

differences extend into networks and opportunities. Social inequality is perpetuated in this process, deepening the despair of those at the relative bottom (Dittmann, 2016; Kraus et al., 2017).

Social status predicts health vulnerability. This includes infant mortality, cancer, coronary or respiratory diseases, suicide rate, substance abuse, and schizophrenia (Marmot, 2005; Werner et al., 2006). Social status also affects the likelihood of educational success (Pascarella et al., 2004). The academic environment varies across neighborhoods (Espinoza & Vossoughi, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006); upper-status children enter exclusive schools to relish qualified trainings and facilities (McNamee & Miller, 2009; Shin & Lee, 2010; Thomas & Bell, 2009) that are mostly inaccessible to the others.

Social status generates different physical and emotional conditions (Piha et al., 2009). For example, individuals with upper-status occupations get the freedom of choice, respect and liberty within the workplace, whereas lower-status occupations are associated with alienation or work dissatisfaction (Maclean et al., 2014). Many blue-collar workers are unprotected not only from emotional isolation but from health hazards, injury, and even death (Budrys, 2009). Lastly, social status segregates mental health. Higher status improves subjective well-being (Anderson et al., 2012; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2000), while lower status usually accompanies stress and hostility (Gallo & Matthews, 2003). Positions can take away valued experiences, treatments and benefits in these ways.

The Perceptions of Social Status

Importantly, these across-strata distinctions get socially reinforced. More often than, we are judged by what we have and what we do. According to Fiske et al. (2006), receiving information about others induces guesses of their traits, skills, abilities, or motivations. These guesses, in fact, often operate with biases.

Understanding this process is crucial because it underlies many social discriminations (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Kraus et al., 2013). In fact, a few of those biased guesses are socially shared and embedded as stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost et al., 2001). Commonly across cultures, especially, status is linked to competencies attached (Blendon et al., 2006; Cuddy et al., 2008; Leary, 2019; Nezlek et al., 2007). Whereas upper-status elicits acknowledgment and admiration (Fiske, 2018; Jost et al., 2001), for instance, lower status often provokes devaluation (Lott, 2012). Those with respected jobs or high income are assumed to be intelligent, ambitious, driven, eager and self-profitable (Arnocky & Vaillancourt, 2014; Blendon et al., 2006; Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Peeters, 2001; Rotenberg et al., 2010; Streib, 2011). On the other hand, the American national poll from National Public Radio (NPR), the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School show that many people believe those socioeconomically poor to lack aspiration and morality (Population Reference Bureau [PRB], 2011).

Eventually, these perceptions become corporeal. For example, lower-status parents are widely viewed as incapable of upbuilding their children (Lott, 2001). These children receive less expectation and attention from their teachers as well (Streib, 2011). Furthermore, low family social status (e.g., parent's occupation, history of financial aids) restricts candidates from entering mainstream institutions despite having decent stories or skills (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016).

Status background constitutes a robust basis of social attitudes and evaluations. These stereotypes can split opportunities across many spheres. While critiques of such a phenomenon are rising, studies are yet to probe the existence of this phenomenon in more ordinary interactions. Throughout life, we see various people under different contexts. During most interactions, our social or economic status is quite easily exposed (Kraus et al., 2017). Accurate detections are made even with minimal hints (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). Detection precipitates impressions; again, information on backgrounds and affiliations incites involuntary, biased guesses. These guesses, finally, affect some senses of or perhaps a desire for meaningful connections (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2006, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005).

Hence, there is a distinct possibility that status information is exchanged in everyday interactions and that people get influenced by subsequent impressions. Our study, in other words, began from speculating such signs to reciprocate with prejudice shared across society, manifesting in individuals' behaviors during person-to-person encounters. I posit

such a phenomenon as one type of *modern prejudice*: a subtle and indirect expressions of biases that recently increased in accordance with the rising social norm against explicit prejudice (Perry et al., 2015).

I formulated two main hypotheses. First, the implied social status information of a character during a conversation will change the attitudes of participants. I aimed at observing whether the character of upper-status gets generally preferred across several moments of decision. Second, possibly as a mediating mechanism, such status signs will evoke stereotypical expectations. We, specifically, expected the character of upper-status to be viewed as more competent and intelligent than that of relatively lower-status. Figure 1 displays my simplified research model.

This study aims to illuminate the potential that biased guesses in everyday interactions, though barely having discriminatory intentions, accumulate and become a firm barrier. Our results will propose one of the potential routes that status privilege has been and will be transmitted constantly and intrinsically across generations.
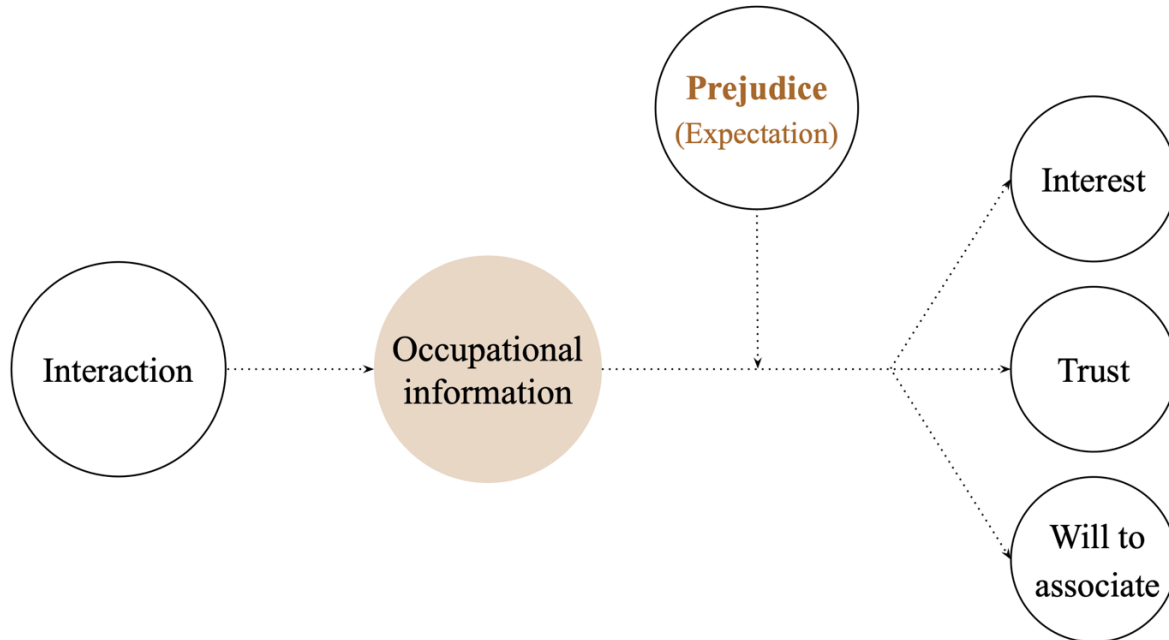

Figure 1. A conceptual model of social status-related prejudice and subsequent attitudes.

Methods

Participants

Seventy-two South Korean undergraduate students (36 female, 36 male) at Seoul National University volunteered to take part in the online survey. Participants were recruited through the school's departmental participant recruitment system (SONA). All participants were compensated with research credits they can apply to psychology courses for an extra score.

Procedure

I first created three scripts of first-person view in which participants become a protagonist and imaginarily go on a trip. The scripts progressed chronologically and each script presented a fictitious character. The brief descriptions are as follows:

The first scene narrates one boarding a train to take a day trip. Soon after sitting down and putting on earphones, the next seat-stranger says a warm hello. Introducing each other, one and the stranger continue to have a

conversation. The stranger says that it is having a vacation after a long time, is currently in the forties, grew up near the sea, and recently started practicing cooking.

In the second scene, one gets off a train and grabs a taxi to get to a must-eat place. A taxi driver greets one and tosses some friendly questions. One gets to know that the driver retired months ago and chose this job as it likes meeting various people. Then, the driver carefully suggests visiting a local restaurant that he(she) recommends.

The last scene portrays one strolling through an alley after the meal, holding a cup of coffee. Suddenly, a close friend calls. While chattering, the friend tells that it lately got through to a senior they both formerly knew. The friend asks one's opinion on inviting the senior to a dinner planned for next week.

Next, I appended social status to three fictitious characters—the stranger, the taxi driver, and the senior. As a powerful status sign, I operationalized one of the main components of social status—occupation (Bucciol et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2012; Manstead, 2018). The recent trend analysis of occupational prestige in South Korea revealed that the relative job standings remained stable over two decades (Kye & Hwang, 2017). Despite some movements to shrink disparity in recognition, occupation is the most intuitive indicator that defines one and determines an immediate position (Connelly et al., 2016; Fujishiro et al., 2010). To choose the occupations, I referred to the job ratings officially provided by commercial dating agencies in South Korea. I considered these standards as most accurately demonstrating the general perceptions of occupational status across Koreans—a tacit consensus about the hierarchical structure ingrained in the society. As a result, I decided to introduce the stranger as either a doctor (upper) or a cleaner (lower) at the university hospital; the taxi driver as formerly being either a wealthy entrepreneur (upper) or a small business employee (lower); the senior as working either at a law firm (upper) or part-time as a delivery man (lower). This ended up eventually making three sets of two identical scripts with the different social status of the character.

Participants were given a survey and randomly allocated to one of the two conditions—upper-status or lower-status. First of all, the survey requested participants to be absorbed in the narrated scenes as if they were traveling and experiencing the interactions for real. Then, the created scripts appeared. Those in the upper-status condition were provided with scripts that present characters of the upper-status occupation. Scripts for those in the lower-status condition, on the contrary, presented those with the corresponding occupation.

After reading each script, participants were asked to imagine their tentative decisions in each situation. These decisions indicated their 1) interest in the character, 2) trust in the character, and 3) will to associate with each character. Next, they guessed about 4) level of competence and intelligence of the character (i.e., 'expectation'). Lastly, I asked participants to infer the social status of the character. I ultimately sought to see whether the first three facets, even under identical situations, diverge only by the characters' occupation, possibly because of their stereotypical expectations. The survey ended with questions asking several demographic information.

Measures

Interest
After reading the first script, participants chose whether they would stop the conversation and put on the earphones or would continue talking with the stranger, using a horizontal 7-Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Extremely want to listen to music") to 7 ("Extremely want to keep the conversation"). This decision indicated their interest in the stranger.

Trust
After reading the second script, participants decided whether they would eat at the place they had found in advance or would try out the recommended restaurant, using a horizontal 7-likert scale ranging from 1 ("Extremely want to move as planned") to 7 ("Extremely want to abide by the driver"). This decision indicated their trust in the taxi driver.

Wills to associate

After reading the third script, participants determined whether they would invite the senior to the dinner or would meet only those initially invited, using a horizontal 7-Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Extremely don't want to invite") to 7 ("Extremely want to invite"). This decision indicated their willingness to associate with the senior.

Expectation

After reading each script, participants were asked to report their expectations on the character. I assessed two of the stereotype contents that are most commonly and closely associated with social status—competence and intelligence (Durante et al., 2017; Holoien & Fiske, 2013; Peeters, 2001). Participants indicated the degree to which the character seems to be competent and intelligent using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("Extremely").

Perceived Social Status

I checked whether I have successfully manipulated social status by assessing participants' inferences. I used the Mac-Arthur Scale of Subjective Socioeconomic Status, which captures the common sense of social status based on usual indicators (Giatti et al., 2012). Participants were presented with a ladder with ten rungs representing Korean society—of which top rung (1) refers to individuals at the highest (i.e., in terms of wealth, education, career) of the social status hierarchy, whereas bottom rung (10) refers to the lowest of the hierarchy. Participants indicated their perception of each character's relative status by placing it on the rung.

Analysis

I computed mean scores of the dependent variables in each condition and carried out t-tests using SPSS software to confirm the significance of the differences between the scores.

Results

Manipulation check

First, I examined the perceived social status of the six characters depicted in three scripts, of which half was created to signal upper status and the other half to signal lower-status. Each script presented one set of contrasting characters. Results indicated that among the three sets of characters, two sets—in the first and third scripts—were perceived to have opposite social status (Figure 2). The stranger introduced as a doctor (M = 7.58, SD = 0.94) in the first script was averagely placed higher on the social status hierarchy than the stranger introduced as a cleaner (M = 5.81, SD = 1.37). The senior explained to be a lawyer (M = 7.00, SD = 1.04) in the third script was also perceived as an upper-status, while the senior explained to be a delivery man (M = 5.75, SD = 1.30) were inferred to be at low on the hierarchy. The difference between the mean scores were significant for both in the first script (p < .001, t = 5.96, SE = 1.72 [1.14, 2.31]) and the third script (p < .001, t = 4.14, SE = 1.25 [.64, 1.86]. The perceived social status of the characters displayed in the second script—a retired entrepreneur (M = 5.78, SD = 0.96) and a retired employee (M = 5.5, SD = 1.30)—were not significantly different (p = .35, t = .95, SE = .28 [-.31, .87]). The results suggest that in the two of the three scripts, the occupations I have utilized indicated either an upper- or a lower-social-status as intended.

Figure 2. Mean perceived social status of the characters in the three scripts.

Next, I analyzed whether individuals' attitudes (i.e., interest, trust, will to associate) change solely by the social status of the character they interact with, notwithstanding the same situation.
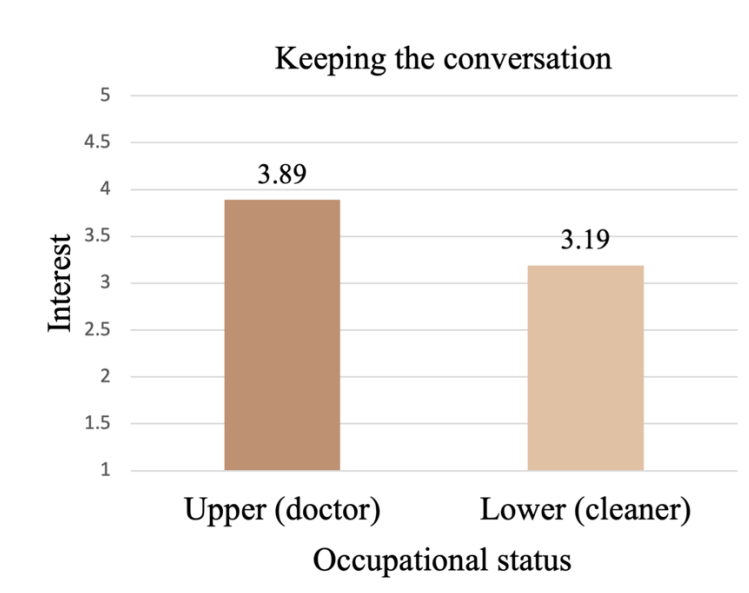

Figure 3. Mean interest in the characters in the first script.

Interest

There was a significant difference in the participants' interest in the characters presented in the first script (Figure 3). After reading the script, participants chose to keep the conversation with the stranger introduced as a doctor (M = 3.89, SD = 1.28) much more than when they met one introduced as a cleaner (M = 3.19, SD = 1.65; p = .05, t = 1.99, SE = .35 [-.001, 1.39]).
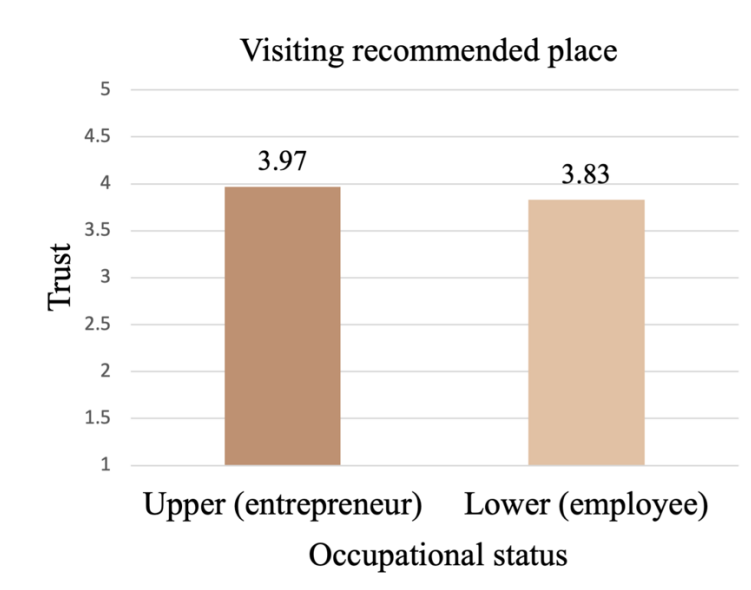
Figure 4. Mean trust in the characters in the second script.

Trust

The trust that the participants had in the characters depicted in the second script was not notably different (p = .76, t = -.30, SE = -.13 [-1.07, .79]; Figure 4). Participants chose to give up sticking to the initial plan and to follow the taxi driver's recommendation to a constant degree, no matter how high (i.e., entrepreneur; M = 3.97, SD = 1.86) or low (i.e., employee; M = 8.83, SD = 2.01) the former occupational status of the driver was.

Figure 5. Mean will to associate with the characters in the third script.

Will to associate

The wills that the participants expressed to associate with the characters depicted in the third script also had a considerable gap ($p < .001$, $t = 4.00$, SE = 1.25 [.62, 1.88]; Figure 5). Participants were willing to invite the senior explained to be working at a law firm (M = 4.61, SD = .87) to the dinner on the following week significantly much more than one working part-time as a delivery man (M = 3.36, SD = 1.69).
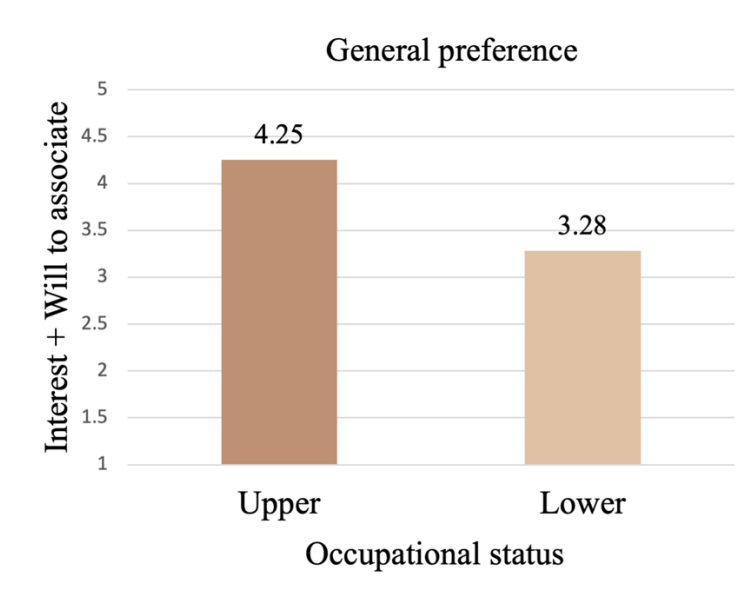

Figure 6. Mean general preference in the characters in the first and the third scripts.

General preference

To further examine the overall preference, I computed the mean score of the interest and will to associate that participants expressed toward the characters in the first and the third scripts. Figure 6 shows that the characters with lower-status occupation (i.e., cleaner and delivery man) generally received negative attitudes (i.e., less interest and less will to associate) compared to the characters with upper-status occupation (i.e., doctor and lawyer; $p < .001$, $t = 3.84$, SE = .25 [.47, 1.48]).

Finally, I speculated that the diverging attitudes that emerged in the first and the third scenes would be related to participants' expectations of certain social status. I explored whether two characters of opposite-status in the first and the third scripts are expected to be more or less competent and intelligent according to their occupational status.
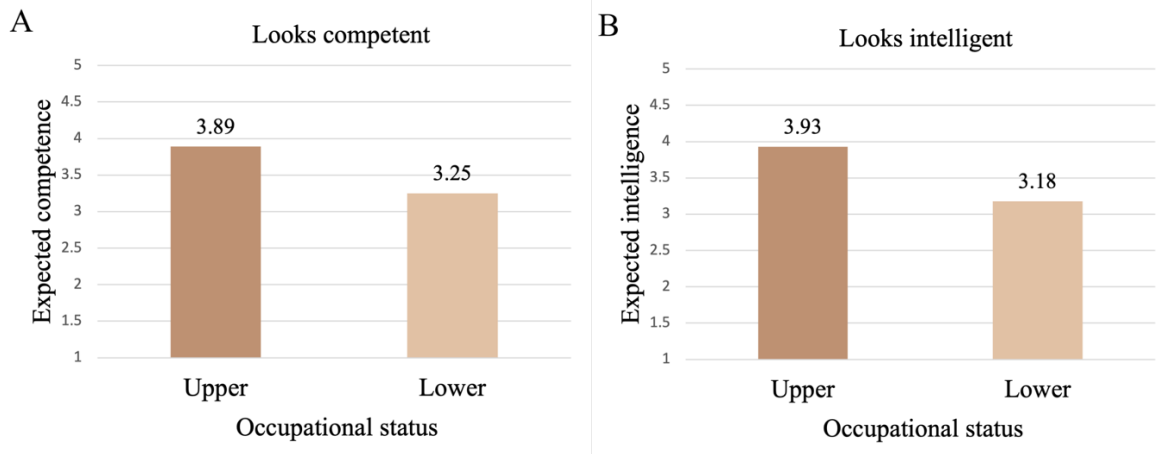
Figure 7. Mean expected competence and intelligence of the characters in the first and the third scripts.

Expectations

As Figure 7 shows, the characters introduced as a doctor or a lawyer were expected to be significantly more competent (M = 3.89, SD = .59; p < .001, t = 4.42, SE = .64 [.34, .93]) and intelligent (M = 3.93, SD = .55; p < .001, t = 5.01, SE = .75 [.45, 1.05]) than those introduced as a cleaner or a delivery man (competence, M = 3.25, SD = .66; intelligence, M = 3.18, SD = 6.00). Potentially, these expectations may have contributed to the positive attitudes (i.e., interest and will to associate) that participants displayed to the upper-status characters.

Discussion and Future Direction

"*There is no superiority or inferiority in a job*," a popular Korean saying goes. Societies nowadays claim all jobs as equally honorable. Ways of making a living are pursued not to determine the ways ones are treated. However, what eventually was thrown to the sacrificed university janitor last year was indifference. Newscasts and articles were busy spotlighting a presidential nominee bereaving his father when the workers were struggling against the university (Citizen's Coalition for Democratic Media [CCDM], 2021).

Our study aimed to illuminate the socially engraved stereotypes that may fundamentally underly this tragedy. As I hypothesized, the characters I have created received different attitudes based on their social status. Specifically, individuals showed greater interest in and will to associate with the characters that were introduced to have an upper-status occupation than in those with a lower-status occupation, though this difference became insignificant with the retired characters. Taken together, the results highlight the role that status signs can play in evoking prejudiced attitudes during ordinary encounters.

Like the earlier studies, I also demonstrated the characters with lower-status occupation being neglected their competence and intelligence, compared to their counterparts (Piff et al., 2018; Stephens et al., 2014). This result accords to the widespread stigmatizations that label lower-status individuals as generally incapable. Spotlighting such stereotypes is critical as they will generate well-intentioned interactions we engage in every day. The stereotypes can, for instance, violate relationships as respect is usually afforded to those perceived as competent (Anderson et al., 2015; Leary, 2019). They can also estrange lower-status individuals from mainstream networks, which would emphasize competencies (Côté, 2011; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Though this study has assessed only two contents of stereotypes, lower status is linked to more negative adjectives such as lethargy, timidity, and ill-intention (Blendon et al., 2006; Côté et al., 2010; Lott, 2012). When these beliefs operate, solely the title can make individuals get their experiences and mobilities constrained.

On the whole, this study succeeded in painting out one demotic manifestation of the perceptive social hierarchy. Although I endeavored to find well-known jobs that most clearly signify contrasting social status, questions remain about whether the findings can be generalized. The types of jobs are countless and their purposes, values, qualifications and intensities vary. Currently, the most vital process for me seems to be testing the findings across more occupations.

This work can also spotlight other diversifying factors beyond social status. The same prestige does not guarantee the same recognition. Jobs can vary in their chief intent—will individuals appreciate altruism, for instance, throwing different perspectives on a priest and a politician? (e.g., Fishman et al., 2015; Gans-Morse et al., 2021; Page, 2016; Wei, 2021)? Will the leader of a non-profit organization and that of a private company elicit different attitudes and expectations? Moreover, the characteristics of the job holder, such as gender, can also bring a variance. Gender stereotypes significantly affect many interactive and evaluative situations (e.g., Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rosette & Tost, 2010). Hence, despite having the same job, males can be more or less preferred than females (e.g., Correll et al., 2007; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016; Schaumberg & Flynn, 2017).

Another intriguing work would be taking the social status of individuals themselves into account. The perceived association between social status and attributes like competence and intelligence may rise or abate depending on their status. Social status impacts how individuals perceive the self and others (Côté, 2011; Manstead, 2018; et al., 2018). Typically, when it comes to personal and societal achievements, upper-status individuals tend to hold dispositions and capabilities responsible (Johnson & Krueger, 2005; Kraus et al., 2012), whereas many lower-class individuals accentuate circumstances (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Mendoza-Denton & Mischel, 2007). I suspect of these orientations prompting the uniquely held stereotypes, building some disparities in status-directed reactions.

Conclusion

Studies on implicit discrimination are especially important nowadays. Many obvious discriminations are denounced, but status signs still emerge in a variety of contexts, interacting with the beliefs that individuals hold. Under such a circulation of stereotypes, we savor or lose opportunities. Yet, different titles never serve a rationale for different treatments, although they differ in duties and purposes (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014).

Countries with severe inequality even suffer from economic incompetence, social illnesses, short life expectancy, and life dissatisfaction (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Cheung & Lucas, 2016). Rigorous works must be done on disclosing chronic practices that exist under the pretext of meritocracy, homophily, or whatever reason. I need insight into why inequality continues to persist despite virtuous aspirations.

Acknowledgement

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